

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955)

"What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?"

America's Town Meeting of the Air, New York City - November 23, 1939

In the New Deal era, educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune was called the "First Lady of the Struggle" for her influence on the Roosevelt administration on civil rights issues. In 1904, Bethune founded a small school for black girls in Florida that she quickly built into a thriving college-prep and vocational training program. In 1923, she merged the school with Cookman College to create the first fully accredited black institution of higher learning in the state.

Bethune was born to former slaves in 1875. One of seventeen children, she grew up picking cotton in Sumter County, South Carolina. Her parents owned a five-acre parcel of land, and her mother continued to work for the family that once owned her. Though her parents and siblings were illiterate, Bethune knew as a child that she wanted to escape "the dense darkness and ignorance" in which she found herself.¹ Her ambition to read was only fueled by a white girl who once commanded her to put down a book, saying, "You can't read."²

Bethune was one of the first youngsters to sign up for a new mission school for black children built near her home. She recalled, "That first morning on my way to school I kept the thought uppermost, 'put that down - you can't read,' and I felt that I was on my way to read."³ Bethune was not only on her way to read, she was on her way to a lifelong career devoted to educating a people only a generation or two away from slavery.

As an adult, Bethune's influence soon extended far beyond the South. She was a gifted organizer and became a leader in the effort to build coalitions among black women fighting for equal rights, better education, jobs, and political power. After leading numerous local, regional, and national women's clubs, Bethune founded a new umbrella organization in 1935, the National Council of Negro Women. Through this work Bethune became close friends with Eleanor Roosevelt, who encouraged Franklin D. Roosevelt to name Bethune director of the Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration in 1935. Bethune lunched regularly with Mrs. Roosevelt in the White House.⁴

As a member of FDR's "black cabinet," Bethune was the only African American woman to hold an influential post in the administration. She met every Friday night at home with her black colleagues and civil rights leaders such as Charles H. Houston, Walter White, and A. Philip Randolph. She called the men together to stay apprised of their work and to use her influence to

improve the lives of African Americans and fight inequality.⁵

Bethune's position gave her access not only to the president but, on occasion, to a radio audience of millions. On the eve of America's entrance into World War II, she joined a panel discussion on NBC radio's weekly public affairs broadcast of "America's Town Meeting of the Air." The panelists addressed the question, What does American democracy mean to me? With her Victorian elocution and a thunderous tone, Bethune reminded her listeners that African Americans had always been willing to die for American democracy but were still shut out from its promise of freedom.

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Democracy is for me, and for 12 million black Americans, a goal towards which our nation is marching. It is a dream and an ideal in whose ultimate realization we have a deep and abiding faith. For me, it is based on Christianity, in which we confidently entrust our destiny as a people. Under God's guidance in this great democracy, we are rising out of the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom. Here my race has been afforded [the] opportunity to advance from a people 80 percent illiterate to a people 80 percent literate; from abject poverty to the ownership and operation of a million farms and 750,000 homes; from total disfranchisement to participation in government; from the status of chattels to recognized contributors to the American culture.

As we have been extended a measure of democracy, we have brought to the nation rich gifts. We have helped to build America with our labor, strengthened it with our faith and enriched it with our song. We have given you Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson and George Washington Carver. But even these are only the first fruits of a rich harvest, which will be reaped when new and wider fields are opened to us.

The democratic doors of equal opportunity have not been opened wide to Negroes. In the Deep South, Negro youth is offered only one-fifteenth of the educational opportunity of the average American child. The great masses of Negro workers are depressed and unprotected in the lowest levels of agriculture and domestic service, while the black workers in industry are barred from certain unions and generally assigned to the more laborious and poorly paid work. Their housing and living conditions are sordid and unhealthy. They live too often in terror of the lynch mob; are deprived too often of the Constitutional right of suffrage; and are humiliated too often by the denial of civil liberties. We do not believe that justice and common decency will allow these conditions to continue.

Our faith in visions of fundamental change as mutual respect and understanding between our races come in the path of spiritual awakening. Certainly there have been times when we may



have delayed this mutual understanding by being slow to assume a fuller share of our national responsibility because of the denial of full equality. And yet, we have always been loyal when the ideals of American democracy have been attacked. We have given our blood in its defense—from Crispus Attucks on Boston Commons to the battlefields of France. We have fought for the democratic principles of equality under the law, equality of opportunity, equality at the ballot box, for the guarantees of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have fought to preserve one nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Yes, we have fought for America with all her imperfections, not so much for what she is, but for what we know she can be.

Perhaps the greatest battle is before us, the fight for a new America: fearless, free, united, morally re-armed, in which 12 million Negroes, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Americans, will strive that this nation under God will have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, for the people and by the people shall not perish from the earth. This dream, this idea, this aspiration, this is what American democracy means to me.

[applause]

1. Mary McLeod Bethune, interview by Charles S. Johnson, Florida Memory Project, [www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/Mary Bethune/interview.cfm](http://www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/Mary_Bethune/interview.cfm), 1.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: The Defining Years, Volume Two, 1933-1938* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 159-61.
5. Ibid., 90. B. Joyce Ross, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration: A Case Study of Power Relationships in the Black Cabinet of Franklin D. Roosevelt," in *Black Leaders*, 191-219.